

## CHRIST CHURCH PRIORY, CANTERBURY.

**O**N the north side of Canterbury Cathedral are the remains of the great Priory of Christ Church, originally founded by Lanfranc on the plan of a Norman Benedictine monastery.

After all the changes they have witnessed, after all the transformations they have undergone, after the ravages of fire, after the havoc wrought by Puritan destroyers, and by the ignorance of modern restorers, and the decay of ages, a considerable portion of these conventional buildings still exists. Some are still in good preservation, others nothing but a picturesque ruin; but all alike, with their surroundings of soft, rich verdure, form a beautiful foreground to the stately Cathedral pile.

The labours of Professor Willis and the help of ancient drawings discovered in an illuminated Psalter preserved at Trinity College, Cambridge, make it easy to understand the original arrangement of the monastery in Norman days, and the successive additions and alterations made by later Priors. Throughout pre-Reformation times the general plan of Lanfranc's foundation seems to have been retained. The chapter-house, cloisters, refectory dormitories, infirmary, and other buildings used by the monks, were grouped together close under the north side of the church and cemetery, while the large, open space known as the Prior's or Green Court divided them from the stables, bake-house, brewery, and other offices.

Several of the most beautiful architectural fragments remaining are of late Norman work and belong to the middle of the twelfth century, when, after the completion of Prior Conrad's 'Glorious Choir' and the dedication in 1130, the Priors of Christ Church had more leisure to turn their attention to the monastery.

Of this period is the circular, bell-shaped tower of the lavatory, commonly called the Baptistry, at

the corner of the Infirmary cloister and close to the dark entry or covered way leading to the Great Cloister. This was the work of Prior Wibert—'a man,' says the monk Gervase, 'worthy of praise and admirable in good works,' who first brought a supply of water into the Convent from a spring in a field, called the Holmes, three-quarters of a mile distant, and himself planned the complete system of waterworks by which the Cathedral precincts are supplied at the present day. His tower consisted of two storeys; and the upper one contained the circular laver, or marble cistern, at which the monks who passed from the dormitory, or cloister, through the vaulted passage into the crypt might wash their hands and faces on their way to church.

NORMAN ARCH & STAIRWAY  
CANTERBURY.

This portion of the tower was altered three centuries later by Prior Chillenden, who raised the roof and inserted Perpendicular windows

in the place of the old Norman ones; but the lower storey remains as it was in Wibert's time, and its roof is a beautiful specimen of Norman ribbed vaulting, springing from a hollow central pillar, which contained the water-pipes that fed the laver above.

The memory of Wibert, who was Prior of Christ Church from 1153 to 1167, and died when Becket's quarrel with Henry II. was at its height, was long gratefully cherished by the monks whose benefactor he had been; and we may probably trace his hand in the Norman arches of the passage known as the Dark Entry and in the porch and staircase which now form the entrance to the King's School.

This ancient Porch—one of the finest fragments of Norman work to be seen in England—belonged to a large hall, known as the Aula Nova, or Strangers' Hall, which stood at the north-west corner of the Green Court, and was pulled down and rebuilt thirty years ago.

One of the first duties inculcated by the rule of

St. Benedict was the practice of hospitality, and accordingly we find that Christ Church Priory contained three separate groups of buildings set apart for the entertainment of strangers.

At the south-east corner of the Green Court, close to the Cathedral Choir, were the spacious apartments known as the *Camera Prioris*, in which the most illustrious guests were lodged. These rooms, built in Norman times, but afterwards greatly enlarged, are often spoken of as the Omers, or Homors, an appellation, probably derived, as Professor Willis suggests, from a grove of elms—*ormeaux*—just as a portion of the monks' cemetery bore the name of The Oaks, and another piece of ground within the precincts is called in old documents The Gymewes, from *guimaux*—marsh-mallow. The whole group of buildings, including the Banqueting Hall, known by the name of 'Meister Omers,' were broken up into prebends' houses at the Dissolution, when as many as three stalls were provided with residences out of these ancient Hospitia.

On the western side of the Green Court, near the kitchen and refectory, and divided by the Prior's rooms by the monastic buildings, were the Guest Hall and lodgings, afterwards rebuilt and enlarged by Chillenden for the second class of visitors, who were under the special charge of the Cellarer, a monk who had the superintendence of the kitchen and other offices of the monastery.

Finally, close to the Court Gate was the great Hall, known first as the Aula Nova, in later days as Hog Hall, where the poorest pilgrims found food and shelter. Near this Hall outside the convent precincts was the Almonry Yard, where, by command of Archbishop Winchelsea, the poor who begged for alms at the door were fed daily on the fragments—"which were many and great"—left daily at the monks' tables, and which were brought under a pentise, or covered way that led from the kitchen to the Court Gateway.

The Hall itself, a late Norman structure, was rebuilt in 1855, but the porch and external staircase, indicated in Wibert's plan of the Priory Waterworks, fortunately remains unaltered, and is valuable as the only construction of the kind in England. The round arches are enriched with varied and beautiful ornaments, and the slender marble pillars on either side of the steps have scolloped capitals—as Somner said, 'a very graceful ascent,'—with its worn edges, blackened columns, and air of venerable decay, an admirable subject for the artist's pencil.

Seven years after the death of Prior Wibert, of good memory, came the terrible fire, which reduced the Glorious Choir to ashes, and, in the pathetic words of Gervase, changed 'a paradise of pleasure into a weary wilderness.' During many years the priors were engaged in rebuilding those portions of the Cathedral and adjoining buildings which had

perished in the flames. Prior Sittingbourne, who was banished during six years in the long quarrel between King John and Langton, adorned the cloisters with a graceful arcade and rich doorways in the Early English style, then generally in use; and about the middle of the century Roger de St. Alphege built the Prior's Chapel, dedicated to the Virgin, which was pulled down two hundred years ago. No other important works were accomplished till the close of the century, when Henry De Estria held the Prior's office during forty-six years.

This 'very great and valuable man,' as he is called in the Obituary, 'lived till the age of ninety-two, and died, during the celebration of High Mass, on the 6th of April, 1331.' Among the many memorable things recorded of him we find a long list of 'sumptuous foundations' and 'extensive repairs' executed within the precincts of Christ Church. While the jewels which he lavished on Becket's Corona, and the clock which he placed in the Cathedral at a time there was only one other in England—at Westminster Hall—excited the admiration of his contemporaries, his chief claim on our gratitude to-day is the beautiful stonework screen with which he adorned the choir. The doorway and two large windows, in the same decorated style of the present Chapter House, were also De Estria's work, as was also the building known as the 'Old Cheker,' which formerly stood at the north end of the Dark Entry, adjoining the Priors' apartments. One of Prior De Estria's special merits was his careful administration of the large revenues of the monastery, and the exact account which he took of the lands and income of Christ Church. Accordingly we find that he built this two-storeyed pile above the Infirmary Cloister, to be the counting-house of the monastery, where all accounts were kept and business matters in general were transacted. The name 'Cheker,' by which it became popularly known, was probably derived from Camera ad Saccarium, under which title it appears in the list of De Estria's works. After the Dissolution the building was allotted to the Dean as part of his lodging, and in later times it became successively the residence of one of the Six Preachers and the Choristers' School, until it was pulled down in 1866. Henry De Estria's immediate successors—Prior Oxenden and Prior Hathbrande—both directed their attention to the repair and improvement of the Infirmary. The chapel was transformed from the Norman into the Decorated style, several chambers for the use of the sick were added, and a large stone hall erected as a refectory. At the Dissolution all the Infirmary buildings were transformed into prebendal houses, but in Dean Alford's time these were in their turn demolished as superfluous, and a considerable portion of the Infirmary Hall and Chapel was again laid bare, and left standing on the north side of the Cathedral Choir

Prior Hathbrande built a new kitchen in place of the Norman one, and both he and De Estria made large additions to the Priors' lodgings—that group of buildings at the south-east corner of the Green Court, which now form so picturesque a ruin between the Deanery and the Cathedral. Here was the chamber known as 'Le Gloriet,' a term applied by French writers to a small banqueting-hall or a room at the top of a tower; and here, too, the Gateway Tower, known first as the Prior's, afterwards as the Dean's, Study, was erected and decently adorned with fair glass windows by a later Prior, William Sellyng. But the greatest builder of all the Priors was Thomas Chillenden, who succeeded in 1391, and held office

hand—here a Perpendicular doorway, there a row of windows, here again a chamber still in good preservation. Besides his three great works—the rebuilding of the Cathedral nave, the completion of the Chapter House, and erection of the Cloisters—he repaired the Dormitory and Lavatory, added rooms to the Infirmary and Prior's Lodgings, rebuilt the banquet-hall, known as Meist' Omers, the brewhouse, stables, barns, tailor's shop, and Cellarer's Lodgings. To these he added 'a new chamber for hospitality,' which bore during long years the name of Chillenden's Guest Chambers, and now forms part of the Bishop of Dover's house.

The Perpendicular windows of the Chapter House,



CHRIST CHURCH CLOISTERS, CANTERBURY.

during twenty years. It would be impossible to enumerate here one half of the long list of his works preserved in the roll discovered by Professor Willis in the Chapter records. His whole life, and all the resources of the monastery, were devoted to these splendid enterprises, which, in Somner's words, have made his name worthy of eternal memory.

Leland, who visited Canterbury just after the Dissolution, when his great works were still fresh in the minds of the citizens, speaks of him as the greatest builder of a Prior that ever was in Christ Church, and mentions, among his good deeds, the restoration of the Chequers Inn at the corner of the High Street, and the Town Wall of the Precincts, which, with three square towers between Northgate and Queenengate, was also rebuilt by him.

There is scarcely a corner of the conventional buildings where we do not meet with traces of his

and the beautiful oak roof which it still retains, were his work; and so also was the greater part of the 'goodly cloister,' which won the admiration of Leland, who saw it in its original beauty and completeness.

The demolition of the Cathedral nave, which Archbishop Sudbury found in so ruinous a state that it had to be taken down, entailed the destruction of the South Wall of the Norman cloisters, and a document of 1397 describes the task of rebuilding the whole as imperative. Prior Chillenden began the work, and, although it was left incomplete at his death, the design undoubtedly belongs to him.

In the place of the shed-roof and single columns of the old Norman cloister, he erected a richly groined vaulting, composed of seventeen ribs springing from each shaft, and adorned at the intersections with carved bosses. In front we have a series of mullioned and traceried openings, divided by pinnacled but-

tresses, and crowned with crocketed and ogeed hood mouldings. To-day crockets and pinnacles are shattered, the stones of the blackened arches are slowly crumbling away, but in all the Precincts there is no pleasanter spot than this old cloister-walk, where the grass grows thick and long over the tombstones, and swallows skim the blue air overhead round the topmost storeys of the great Cathedral tower.

Nowhere else can we better study the different styles of successive ages than in the back walls of these alleys, which Professor Willis calls 'a perfect museum of mediaeval architecture.' Here we see in the north alley along the Refectory wall the slender arcades of Prior Sittingbourne's work, unfortunately ruined by the insertion of Chillenden's shafts. In the east walk we have first the fine old Norman doorway leading into the Dormitory, next the Perpendicular entrance to the Dark Entry; then the Decorated doorway and windows of the Chapter House; then another door of Perpendicular workmanship; and, lastly, the richly-carved Early English portal, which replaced the door by which Becket passed into the transept on the day of his martyrdom. This last elaborately ornamented doorway has been defaced by the addition, in Archbishop Morton's time, of an archway of late Perpendicular work. The south-west walk of the cloister belongs entirely to Chillenden's time, and here accordingly the doorways correspond with his design. But one doorway in the west alley leading from the Archbishop's palace retains traces of older Norman work on the other side of the wall, and thus betrays its more ancient origin. This, strange to say, was the very door through which Becket entered the cloisters when pursued by his murderers on that fatal evening.

Towards the close of the fifteenth century the south walk of the cloisters was glazed by Prior Sellyng, who fitted this alley up with 'pewes and carrells,' wainscoted with oak, and furnished with desks for the use of the monks at their studies. About the same period the groined roof of the cloisters was adorned with that vast display of shields bearing the arms of illustrious benefactors to the Cathedral, emblazoned in their heraldic colours. These carved shields, as many as eight hundred and eleven in number, were formerly inscribed with the name of the owner, whose arms they bore, and, in their original condition, must have filled these dark alleys with a perfect blaze of glowing colour.

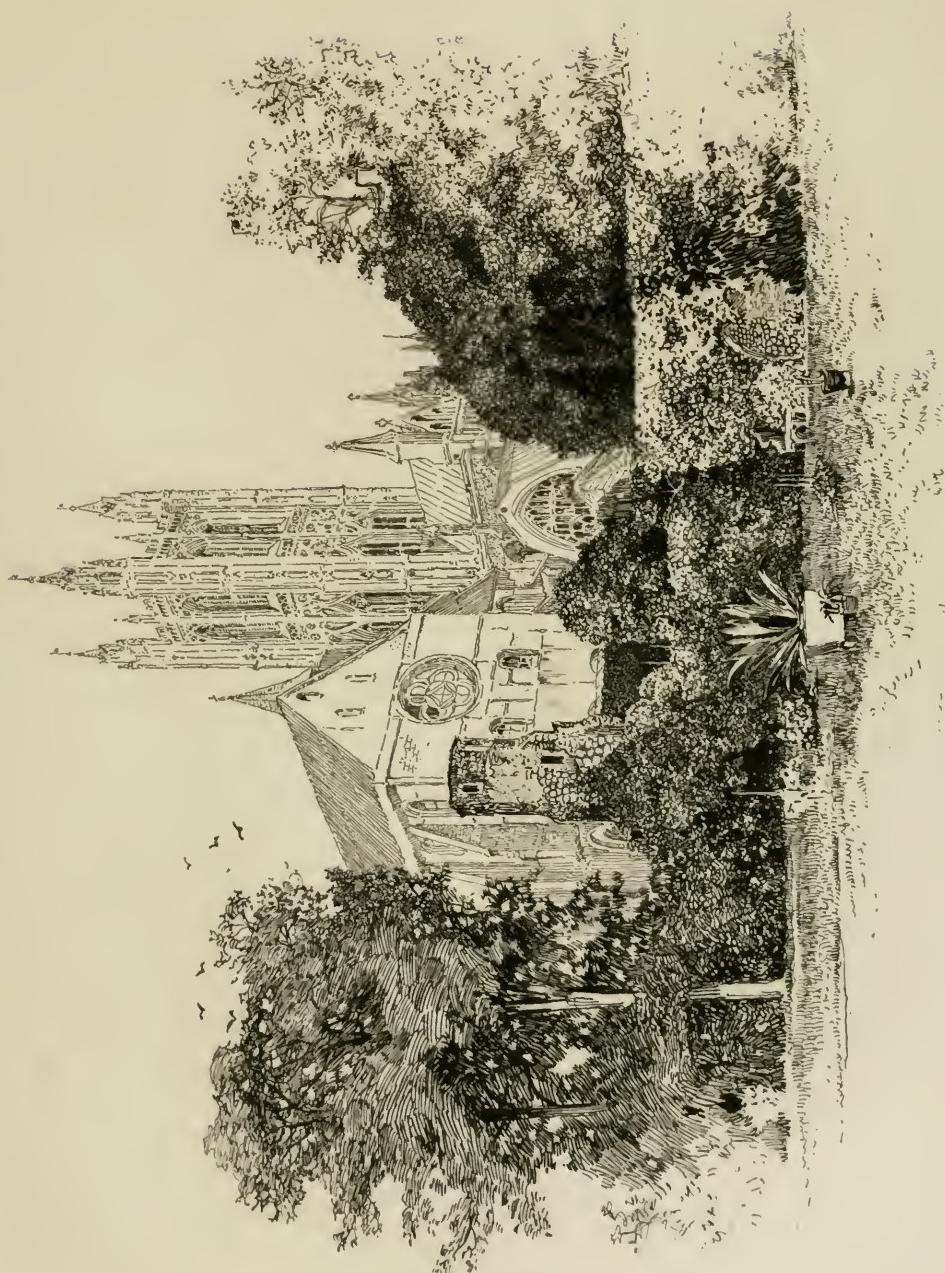
Whether the great master-builder who reared this Cloister was himself the actual architect of all these noble works we cannot tell, but we know that he personally directed their execution; and in a deed of gift to the Cathedral, drawn up in 1397, Archbishop Arundel expresses the hope that the construction of

the nave may be speedily continued, lest its final completion be retarded by the loss of that very great and excellent man the present Prior.

The Primate's hope was destined to find fulfilment. The Cathedral works were vigorously carried on by the indefatigable Prior, and Chillenden died on the Feast of the Assumption, 1411—in the very year that the nave was completed. He was buried in the Cathedral nave—'a stately pile,' remarked the historian of Canterbury, 'and chiefly of his raising.' A Latin epitaph on the tomb recorded this as the one of all his works by which he desired to be remembered. Here, too, before three years had expired, his faithful friend and munificent helper, Archbishop Arundel, was laid to rest.

After Chillenden's time the most active building Priors were Thomas Goldstone I., who finished the bell-tower at the south of the nave, and added a chapel on the north side of the church, and William Sellyng (1472–1494), who, besides the works already mentioned, built the city wall and towers between Queenengate and Burgate, and the Library over the Priors' Chapel. His greatest work of all, on which he had bestowed a vast amount of time and thought—the Central Tower—was completed, within a year of his death, by his successor, Prior Goldstone II., an equally distinguished architect, 'in nothing,' we are told, 'more famous than for his much building.' Already in Prior Sellyng's lifetime he had taken a leading part in the building of Bell Harry Steeple; and when this great work was accomplished he turned his attention to repairs and improvements in the monastery, where his arms—three gold stones, the mitre, and staff—bore record in many places to his zeal. Among other works, he added an Oratory to the Priors' Chapel, with hagioscopes looking into the north-east transept of the Cathedral, by which means the Prior and his guests could, from their private sanctuary, assist at the celebration of Mass in the chapels below. He also built the 'new, beautiful, and excellent edifice commonly called the New Lodgyngh, near the ancient house of the Prior called Le Gloriet.' This 'New Lodgyngh,' intended by Goldstone exclusively for the exercise of hospitality, became at the Dissolution the residence of the Dean, and retained its original form little altered until the present century. Last of all, Prior Goldstone began the great Gateway at the entrance of the Precincts leading across the outer cemetery to the south porch of the Cathedral. At his death, in 1517, he left a sum of money to be expended on its completion, and the inscription on the walls shows that it was finished in the same year.

This noble Gatehouse is a worthy monument of the last of the long race of Prior-architects. Its massive structure presents a marked contrast to the beautiful decorated Gateway of St. Augustine's—the





only portal in Canterbury which can at all compare with this fine specimen of the late Perpendicular period.

Far loftier than any of the Norman gatehouses which belong to Christ Church, Prior Goldstone's Gate has two storeys of chambers above its wide archway, flanked by octagonal turrets, which formerly rose high above the parapet, as in St. Augustine's Gateway, and were only reduced to the level of the rest of the building at the beginning of the present century. Its broad surface is adorned with a goodly array of niches, filled up with angels and with a row of panels enriched with heraldic devices, while the large, canopied niche above the central archway was occupied by the figure of Christ. This was the large stone image which that notorious fanatic Blue Dick and his Philistine band pulled down with ropes in 1642, asserting as his reason for this outrage that he had seen travellers kneel to worship it in the street.

The erection of Christ Church Gate and the death of Goldstone mark the last stage in the history of the venerable Priory. Cathedral and Monastery now stood complete—a fabric rarely excelled in beauty and variety of architecture. If the great Church, with its glorious towers, and glittering shrine, its stained windows, and splendid tapestries, was a sight marvellous to behold; the Priory, with its noble Chapter House and fair Cloisters, its guest-chambers and banquet-halls, its Prior's mansion and chapels, towers and gateways, gave the stranger an impression of almost equal magnificence.

But now the end was near, and the days of the Priory were already numbered. Goldstone's successor,

Thomas Goldwell, was the last Prior who held office in Christ Church. In 1539 the ancient monastery was dissolved and the Prior and monks were ejected. In their stead a Dean, twelve prebendaries, and six preachers, were appointed, on a plan drawn up by Henry VIII. himself. Cranmer appointed Nicholas Wotton to be the first Dean, and offered Goldwell a prebendal stall, but the aged Prior refused to accept office under the new system, and retired into private life.

From that time the history of Christ Church is one long tale of decay and ruin. The Chapter House was turned into a preaching house, the great Dormitory pulled down to furnish materials for the residences of petty canons and vicars, the Infirmary halls and Priors' guest-chambers were mutilated and partitioned off into prebendal houses, while the Cathedral crypt was used as a workshop by Walloon refugees, and as a cellar where the prebendaries stored their wood and wine.

The buildings on which Wibert and De Estria, Chilrenden and Sellyng, had lavished an untold wealth of love and care, were left to moulder away, neglected and forgotten, or broken in pieces by the hammer of Puritan fanatics. Others, which escaped this fate almost by miracle, were pulled down in later days to make room for modern improvements.

When we reflect on these things, and look around us on the remains of this ancient monastery, we begin to feel thankful that, after all, these precious fragments of the Prior-builders' work have been spared to a generation which has better learnt to reverence and value the monuments of bygone days.

JULIA CARTWRIGHT.

